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GENDER, POWER, AND SATIRE IN WILL SELF'S *COCK AND BULL*

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Abstract

While Will Self's *Cock and Bull* has rightly been seen as a satirical critique of gender and sexuality, this article argues that critics have tended to overlook the intertwining critique of power that accompanies such themes. Placing *Cock and Bull* within the larger context of Self's subsequent writings and intellectual influences, this essay examines how these two early novellas self-consciously borrow from and engage with the tradition of British satire, which has long been concerned with questions of gender, sexuality, and power.

> [T]he major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism . . . not only historical fascism . . . but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. . . . Do not become enamored of power.
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> – Michel Foucault, Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*[1]

Will Self's *Cock and Bull* (1992) is a dual set of satirical novellas that, in grotesquely overlapping stories about a woman who grows a penis and a man who discovers a vagina in the back of his knee, would seem most obviously to be about sexuality and gender in contemporary society. Certainly that is how the book's reviewers understood it: Marek Kohn, in *The Independent*, focuses on the comical implications of the characters' newly acquired genitals, while Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times* chides Self for 'dither[ing] on and on about male and female genitalia', concluding that his 'copious gifts are all too frequently put in the service of a misogynistic and ridiculously sophomoric vision'.[2] The surprisingly thin body of academic

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[1] Michel Foucault, 'Preface' in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* ed. by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. xiii–iv.

criticism about Self's book also focuses, from a more theoretical angle, on the question of gender. Katherine Sender's 'To Have and to Be: Sex, Gender, and the Paradox of Change' (1997) locates Self within the discourse of contemporary gender studies, noting how his stories echo the deconstruction of gender binaries undertaken by such feminist critics as Judith Butler, Margery Garber, and Elizabeth Grosz.[3] Emma Parker provides a more in-depth reading in 'Kicks Against the Pricks: Gender, Sex, and Satire in Will Self's *Cock and Bull*' (2011)[4], extending Sender's reading by noting that the satirical elements of Self's book should be understood within the broader cultural discussion about gender that was occurring in the 1980s and 1990s, including the rise of a Men's Movement spearheaded by Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990).[5]

The most recent intervention in this critical discourse is Graham Matthews's *Will Self and Contemporary British Society* (2016), which devotes a chapter to exploring how Self challenges conventional ideas about sexual essentialism in order to enact a more 'performative' notion of gender, including an in-depth discussion of how these themes are realized in *Cock and Bull*. Matthews's position on gender is explicitly grounded in a Butlerian reading of Self's fiction, arguing that Self 'denaturalizes the relationship between anatomical difference and gender in order to view sex as a social and historical construct'.[6] Applying this approach to the protagonists of *Cock and Bull*, Matthews argues that their peculiar anatomical transformations suggest 'that there is no essential self or biological sex that is not already constructed through and by gender; sex is always already a discursive practice'.[7] Matthews's understanding of gender and sexuality as primarily discursive practices in *Cock and Bull* provides an important prelude to my own focus on how Self's treatment of these issues is grounded in a subtle critique of power. *Cock and Bull* is not the only work of Self's that centres on questions of sexuality, and similar complexities relating to power emerge in those texts too. His novel *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002), for instance, is a modern retelling of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), examining themes of

[2] Michiko Kakutani, 'Comic Novellas on Metamorphoses: *Cock & Bull* by Will Self', *New York Times* (31 May 1993) <www.nytimes.com/books/99/09/19/specials/self-bull.html> [accessed 25 August 2016].

[3] Katherine Sender, 'To Have and to Be: Sex, Gender, and the Paradox of Change', *Women and Language*, 20.1 (1997), pp. 18–23.

[4] Emma Parker, 'Kicks Against the Pricks: Gender, Sex, and Satire in Will Self's *Cock and Bull*', *English*, 60.230 (2011), pp. 229–250.

[5] Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2014).

[6] Graham Matthews, *Will Self and Contemporary British Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 94.

[7] Ibid., p. 96.

sexuality and power in a way that affirms Foucault's contention that we truly are the 'other Victorians'.[8] '*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the prophecy and *Dorian* is the fulfilment', observes Self in one interview.[9] David Alderson also views *Dorian* from the perspective of sexuality and power, from the complications of a non-gay author writing about homosexual culture to the complexities of class that Self's re-imagining of Wilde's novel involves. It is with this connection in mind that I seek to read *Cock and Bull* as a pair of novellas that, while dealing with gender and sexuality, is primarily about power.

Sexuality and power

This concern with power reiterates Self's debt to Foucault. Both Sender and Parker argue, in their discussions of *Cock and Bull*, that gender is largely absent from Foucault's writings on sexuality, a lacuna that has drawn particular criticism from feminist critics. Felicity A. Nussbaum, for instance, writes that sex 'in the *History of Sexuality* seems to be limited in its meaning to culturally produced desire and to sexual acts in their many variations and "perversions" rather than to gender or gendered identity. This leads to a virtual exclusion of considering the effect of gender hierarchies in the social formation'.[10] While these criticisms have some validity, Foucault does address the question of gender at various points in his work, most notably in his introduction to the memoirs of the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, in which he challenges the sexual essentialism that leads to Barbin's tragic suicide with the pertinent question: 'Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?'[11] Foucault's interest in the Barbin case shows that, while he does indeed consider gender to be important, such questions are subsumed within a still more urgent critique of sexuality's position as a strategy of power. Foucault contends that modern sexuality should first be understood as a particular historical expression of the human will to power: retooled by science and medicine, it has emerged as part of a range of new technologies of the self that form the contemporary paradigm of power.

Nowhere does Foucault make this point clearer than in Chapter 4 of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), in which he notes how sexuality, in the eighteenth century, came to be deployed as a new strategy of power. Foucault highlights

[9] Robert McCrum, 'Interview: Will Self – Self Analysis', *The Guardian (Observer Review)*, (29 September 2002) <www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/29/fiction.willself> [accessed 25 August 2016].

[10] Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. xv.

[11] Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin (Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite)* (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. vii, original italics.

that the mechanisms of physical and sexual discipline, in particular, emerged not as weapons against the lower classes, but among the bourgeoisie as a means of improving health and productivity and so consolidating power in their historical struggle with the aristocracy. Modern sexuality thus represents a unique strategy of power that is tied to a specific period (originating in the eighteenth century) and class (the bourgeoisie):

> [W]hat was involved was not an asceticism, in any case not a renunciation of pleasure or a disqualification of the flesh, but on the contrary an intensification of the body, a problematization of health and its operational terms: it was a question of techniques for maximizing life. . . . What was formed was a political ordering of life, not through an enslavement of others, but through an affirmation of self. . . . [S]exuality is originally, historically bourgeois[.][12]

It is *within* this paradigm of bourgeois sexual strategy, for Foucault, that we ought to examine the issue of gender. Indeed, he points out that 'the first figure to be invested by the deployment of sexuality, one of the first to be "sexualized," was the "idle" woman', which in turn led to the 'hysterization of woman' that has played such a key role in modern discourses about gender.[13] In order to understand modern gender roles, for Foucault, it is necessary first to understand the network of sexual power relations and strategies that have produced them.

In both his works that deal with sexuality and those that do not, the primacy of power relations is a major theme in Self's fiction. In *Great Apes* (1997), for instance, Self inserts his protagonist into a world where humans have been transformed into chimpanzees. Since their 'chimpunity' does not restrict their ability to perform their usual social functions, Self is able to satirize the concealed power structures of human society. The chimpanzees observe a strict 'dominance order' in every social situation, and this hierarchy extends privileges in everything from money to grooming to sex in a way that mirrors human society.[14] Self's satire lies particularly in the shamelessness of the chimpanzees, whose vulgarity reveals the hypocrisy of a human society which, while engaging in essentially the same behaviours, disavows their ignoble aspects. The satire in *Great Apes* is heightened by the fact that some of the chimpanzees appear in human form elsewhere in his writings – the alpha male psychologist Dr Zack Busner, for example, has been an important

[12] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 122–27.
[13] Ibid., p. 121.
[14] Will Self, *Great Apes* (New York: Grove, 1997), p. 35.

recurring character since Self's first book, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991).

Indeed, in that book Self begins his exploration of the modern discursive power that so fascinated Foucault. Foucault's analyses of the prison in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the hospital in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and the insane asylum in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) all bear an obvious imprint on the stories in *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*. Self's critique of institutional power in these tales focuses mostly on doctors, especially psychologists, with Busner usually a central figure. In the titular story, for instance, Busner sets up a controversial treatment centre known as the Concept House: 'In essence the house was an autonomous community of therapists and patients, except that instead of these rôles being concretely divided among the residents, all were free to take on either mantle at any time.'[15] The Concept House is a parody of La Borde, an experimental psychiatric clinic where Félix Guattari, then a disciple of Jacques Lacan (represented in Self's story by the brilliant but manipulative Alkan, whose name is a thinly-veiled reworking of 'Lacan'), was the director. La Borde's ideals of practical anarchy and radical egalitarianism lived in uneasy coexistence with Guattari's often-authoritarian management, a patriarchal mindset that would eventually result in a bitter power struggle with Lacan. A similar scenario occurs in 'Ward 9', a story from the same collection, which is loosely based on Anton Chekhov's 'Ward 6' (1892). In this story, the first-person narrator, Misha, starts a new job at Ward 9, another clinic run by Busner. Busner orchestrates a series of underhanded tricks on Misha so that, by the end of the narrative, Misha feels compelled to become a voluntary mental patient. 'You had a choice, Misha', Busner declaims at the story's culmination. 'On Ward 9 you could have been therapist or patient; it seems that you have decided to become a patient'.[16] The story plays on the contradiction between the anarchic freedom that Busner believes underlies his psychiatric theories and the authoritarian megalomania that, in practice, is the guiding principle of his experiments.

When approaching the two stories in *Cock and Bull*, therefore, it is crucial to keep in mind these larger themes and concerns in Self's fiction. This is particularly true of the second story, *Bull*, which most closely resembles Self's other writings in casting another doctor, Alan Margoulies, as its central antagonist. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault highlights the mythical function of the doctor, whose role in treatment in nineteenth-century psychiatry, he argues, was for the sake of legitimation rather than actual science, a sentiment

[15] Will Self, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 119.
[16] Ibid., p. 67.

echoed in *Cock and Bull*: '[M]edicine is the modern religion and doctors are our shamen, possessed of arcane knowledge and imbued with the necessary wisdom, and commensurate powers, to decoct the auguries and then to cast out the evil spirits that plague us'.[17] While Margoulies is portrayed as a proficient doctor, these skills are supplemented by institutional and cultural norms that further inflate his social status.

At the forefront of these is 'that great moral and emotional template: home life', for Margoulies, despite having had a number of secret affairs, ostentatiously parades his virtues as a family man, dedicated to his wife Naomi and their young child, Celeste (p. 160). The reader is told that Margoulies is, in fact, 'not nice at all – egotistic, domineering, aggressive and duplicitous. But conscientious – blindingly, achingly conscientious' (p. 160). Margoulies is the exemplary bourgeois described by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, a man who has found success by moulding himself, through a self-discipline that permeates every aspect of his life, from the professional to the sexual, into the compliant tool of the institution he serves.

This subordination of Margoulies's individual will to power produces, in reaction, a covert discourse of perversion made possible by the new discipline of sexuality and power and its attendant gender roles. The reader observes the paradoxes that arise when Margoulies, meditating on his first view of John Bull's vagina, finds himself drawn into a line of thought that begins with general reflections on female genitalia, then the demeaning effects of pornography on women, and culminates in involuntary erotic fantasies about Bull.

> Alan couldn't understand the why, but the more he tried to think about what he should do to help Bull, the more images of Bull that were strictly non-scientific started to flood him. . . . Alan was subjected to these reveries mercilessly. And even when they seemed to be taking an honestly reflective turn . . . he would be brought up sharply by another surge of lust. A surge that pushed Bull's anatomy before Alan's eyes bathed in an entirely different light: roseate, pulsing, undulant, sweetly erotic. . . . (pp. 195–97)

Under the guise of helping his patient, Margoulies heads to the medical library to research Bull's strange condition. The receptionists at the library interpret Margoulies's appearance as further evidence of his 'saintly conscientiousness', but this research is a screen for his real intentions. Caught

[17] Will Self, *Cock and Bull* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 38–39. All further references to this edition.

between his institutional duty as a doctor and the delirium of his sexual will to power, Margoulies looks through medical journals and textbooks on abnormal physiology with the same compulsive fascination demanded by a work of pornography. Despite the apparent opposition between virtue and perversion, Self makes it clear that these two qualities are, in fact, symbiotic aspects of Margoulies's sexual economy. Margoulies's extra-marital affairs, for instance, are justified, in his mind, as a sort of 'compensation' for his virtue, a release valve he considers necessary to protect his otherwise 'saintly' lifestyle. As Self gradually unfolds 'the core of his duplicity' to the reader, we learn that Margoulies's interest in virtue is also the fuel for his perversion – what is forbidden also turns out to be what is most enticing, and so it is that Self compares Margoulies's desire for Bull to Adam and Eve's temptation to eat from the 'Tree of Knowledge' (p. 185). The doctor revels in 'the raw erotic edge of the forbidden' (p. 292).

British satire: the politics of gender

These themes of virtue and vice are also a sign of Self's desire to locate his work in the English novelistic tradition, the history of which often reflects the development of the modern sexual economy outlined by Foucault. In this respect, *Bull* re-enacts a familiar scenario from that tradition: the attempted seduction (through force or otherwise) of a virtuous woman by an unabashed rake, a plot well-known to readers from Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) to Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). In *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987), Michael McKeon locates this emblematic plotline within the changing social politics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which pitted the ruling aristocracy (whose discourses McKeon labels as 'conservative') against the increasing political and economic power of the bourgeois ('progressive') class. McKeon notes how the rise of progressive ideology also leads to a new gender configuration that appropriates and revitalizes the seduction narrative for its own ends.

> [O]ver time the profound alliance between the virtuous industry of commoners and the virtuous chastity of women is remarked and exploited by a developing progressive ideology, and interest shifts to the conflict between aristocratic seducers and constant women. Often these women will also be commoners; but since it is the general fate of gentle daughters to suffer the social injustice that is reserved, among gentle sons, for the young, it is also sufficient liability that they be simply women. And soon virtue in the guise of female chastity becomes powerfully normative in progressive narrative, emblematic of the honor that has been alienated from, and yet is pursued by, a corrupt male aristocracy.[18]

McKeon's genealogy thus provides strong historical evidence that the rise of bourgeois sexuality that Foucault describes within a mostly French context extends also to British culture, with both societies deploying a common strategy of power that in turn produces similar discourses about gender and sexuality.

Self's examination of gender in *Cock and Bull* must be understood within this larger paradigm of power, a bourgeois sexual economy that functions as a new political and social strategy. Self's subversive resurrection of the seduction narrative in *Bull* is unmistakable, for the key elements of the story are all there: the effeminate foppishness of Alan Margoulies, the rake in this story, is signalled for the reader by his 'pretty' face, his delicate 'mouth of a woman', his 'slim and vigorous' body, and the fact that 'he wore his hair unfashionably long, hooked back behind his ear', while the ultra-masculine, rugby-playing John Bull is transformed into a bashful, hesitant, feminine figure through his seduction by Margoulies (p. 159). 'Alan was transported. Bull *was* all woman to him. Bull's hysteria and now this tremulous capitulation. What could be more feminine?' (p. 230, original italics) Despite the hackneyed plot, the subversive twist here is that the seduced woman has been replaced by a man, albeit one with a vagina in the back of his knee.

Thus, while Self appropriates the seduction story that functioned as such an important vehicle for progressive, bourgeois ideology and its attendant gendering of virtue, he nonetheless identifies more closely with the conservative counter-discourse of eighteenth-century literature. McKeon explains further: '[C]onservative narrative, too, soon learns to deploy its own version of the struggle between female common virtue and aristocratic male corruption, to regender ideology so that it subverts rather than supports the progressive argument.'[19] In pointed references scattered throughout *Bull*, Self provides the reader with subtle clues about his novella's connection to this satirical tradition. When Bull is initially exploring his strange new genitalia at the beginning of the novella, for example, Self refers pointedly to *Gulliver's Travels* (1726): 'The thing, whatever it was, was an itch that mustn't – but must – be scratched; and writ Brobdingnagian' (p. 151) In her article on *Cock and Bull*, Emma Parker explores the book's connection to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), another satirical work that 'explores anxieties about masculinity generated by a culture of sensibility' and from which Self's title, she argues convincingly, was borrowed.[20] The most important satirical allusion, however, is contained in the name of Self's protagonist, John Bull,

[18] Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 255–56.

[19] Ibid., p. 256.

[20] Parker, p. 232.

a longstanding personification of the English character that was originally the invention of John Arbuthnot, a friend of Pope and Swift.

Arbuthnot created the character of John Bull in a series of satirical pamphlets collected together as *The History of John Bull* (1712). The context for his satire is the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), a wasteful orgy of political spite that provided rich material for Arbuthnot's tongue-in-cheek portrayal of that period's greed and lust for power. John Bull is represented as a bourgeois commoner who, while virtuous and upright in his own mind, is actually a selfish and clueless blunderer. The original John Bull is thus an invention of conservative ideology, a stinging critique of the vulgarity, hypocrisy, and opportunism of the bourgeois class. Ashley Marshall writes of Arbuthnot's satires: 'Written during a period of Tory dominance ... these pamphlets were evidently meant not to influence the course of current events (e.g. war and peace) but to show up the Whigs and to gratify the Tories.'[21] John Bull's political and social meaning was redrawn throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most famously by Sir John Tenniel in the pages of *Punch* magazine, until he became the positive embodiment of down-to-earth English values, the very opposite of Arbuthnot's original invention. As a satirist himself, Self is naturally fascinated with such reversals, and so it is that his own version of John Bull represents a perverse new turn of this critical wheel.

Self's John Bull is not, of course, a revolutionary in any conscious sense, but Self forces his somewhat dense protagonist to confront the fact of his own capacity for change by endowing him with a vagina. The physiological modifications brought about by this metamorphosis, and his subsequent affair with Margoulies, transforms Bull from being 'a purposeful automaton' into an increasingly self-aware emotional being (p. 234). This revolution is made possible, Self reveals, by tapping into a deeply suppressed part of Bull's personality.

> And as Bull joined the dots of memory and saw the sketchy picture of his latent femininity emerge from a myriad of locker-room blushes and missed emotional connections, Alan was with him – at his side – understanding, empathising, as Bull's wheezing intellect, like the little engine that couldn't, struggled to make sense of his own identity. (p. 228)

Bull's new vagina functions, as Self puts it, as an 'analogy', the 'vitrified hymen' that 'had been broken into shards by Alan's thick dick' representing

[21] Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658-1770* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 178.

the shattering of Bull's ignorance about his real identity (pp. 257–58). John Bull's overt masculinity is thus revealed to be a façade that conceals his latent femininity, just as his apparent conservatism hides a deeper radicalism. Self conjures yet another reversal in the story's conclusion, in which Bull and Margoulies retreat back into bourgeois domestic lives, each playing the role of devoted fathers to their respective children. The revolutionary changes brought about by his genital transformation fail to have a lasting effect on John Bull, so that in the end he returns to the familiar patterns of beer, rugby, and masculinity – farcically, the same configuration of gendered power with which he began the story.

The sudden appearance of the vagina on the back of Bull's knee at the beginning of the story is thus the device by which Self brings to light the hidden power structures of society, especially those related to gender. Bull, in particular, has spent his life up to this point ensconced within the unconscious privileges accorded to him by a hyperbolic masculinity, so that the intrusion of this feminine element forces him to confront the extent to which his personality was a gendered mask without which he finds himself unexpectedly defenceless. Margoulies, by contrast, has always hidden behind a mask of respectibility and heterosexual normality, his long history of perversion allowing him to negotiate more skilfully than Bull the jarring contradiction between his true identity and the performance of adhering to social convention. Such hidden disjunctions are, of course, rich territory for a satirist like Self. Bull's new vagina disrupts his complacently masculine world and forces him to confront the intersections of gender and power that, because these structures had always worked in his favour, he previously accepted as 'natural'.

Satire: a necessary check on revolutionary power

Throughout *Cock and Bull* revolutions only retain their effectiveness when balanced by a critical voice that keeps in check the emerging power that is driving the change. Self applies this same principle elsewhere in his writing: in *Perfidious Man* (2000), for example, a work that explores the question of contemporary masculinity, Self reflects on the motivations that led him to write *Cock and Bull*:

> People would ask me – and still do – what it was about. I'd give various answers: that it was about my rage with feminist arguments that all men were rapists by virtue of possessing the requisite weapon; that it was about the breakdown in gender distinctions which implied that all it was to be either one or the other was a mix and match of the requisite parts; that it was about my own nature, for as Cocteau remarked, all true artists are hermaphrodites.[22]

Although Self immediately qualifies this barrage of reasons by saying 'that it was about none and all of these things', the above quotation is telling for the way Self demonstrates his critical ambivalence towards both allies and enemies.[23] This same ambiguity is evident in his 1999 interview with the feminist critic, Andrea Dworkin, first published in *The Independent* and later collected in *Junk Mail* (2007), in which he reflects on his mixed feelings about her most famous work, *Intercourse* (1987).

> It is a searing polemic which advances the proposition that all penetrative sex is freighted with the possibility of being raped. I – as a young man with a more than average obsession with penetrative sex – found the work simultaneously repugnant and beguiling. Repugnant because it forced me to address the basic antinomies of my gender-based sexuality, and beguiling for exactly the same reason. Dworkin's arguments might have been extreme, but they pushed the true agenda to the surface.[24]

Notice the complexity of Self's assessment, his simultaneous description of Dworkin's book as both 'repugnant and beguiling,' his open mockery of his own biases and intentions, a heterogeneous strategy of interpretation that seeks to find, if it exists, the kernel of wisdom in his enemies while also being acutely aware of the buried prejudices not just of his friends, but most of all himself, engaging constantly in a vigorous critique that must remain, above all, critical of its progenitor.

The conservative satirists of the eighteenth century engage in a similar move, creating a crucial counter-discourse of which Self obviously sees himself as an inheritor. In this respect, Self is more than just an 'enfant terrible' of English letters, as was his reputation when *Cock and Bull* was first published. From the start he has been a serious writer who self-consciously positions his work within a tradition that has a long and distinguished place in British literary culture. The references in *Bull* to John Arbuthnot, Jonathan Swift, and Lawrence Sterne, as well as the story's allusions to later writers in the satirical tradition such as Jane Austen (the chapter titled 'First Impressions' is a reference to the original title of *Pride and Prejudice* [1813]), and Oscar Wilde (Bull's emigration to San Francisco is an allusion to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Sir Henry observes that '[i]t is an odd thing, but everyone who disappears is said to be seen at San Francisco. It must be a delightful city, and possess all the attractions of the next world') are all designed to legitimate Self's place as the inheritor of a satirical discourse that, however outwardly

[22] Will Self and David Gamble. *Perfidious Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 9.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Will Self, *Junk Mail* (New York: Grove, 2006), p. 269.

riotous and unruly and not always entirely respectable, is nonetheless an integral part of the British tradition.[25]

A parallel process of canonical positioning occurs in the first story, *Cock*, which despite a similar pattern of gender inversion as *Bull*, is more concerned with the mechanisms by which discourse is controlled and produced. *Cock* thus opens with an epigraph from Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (1821), and contains further references to William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1798) (the title of the first chapter is 'The Prelude') and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). Alongside these English romantic poets is an allusion to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1888), the subtitle of which Self borrows for the title of Chapter 6. These canonical echoes are chosen for the way they echo the novella's theme of self-realization, of becoming what one is. The path described in each of these works is consciously mythological rather than realistic.

Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, for example, is not about a poet's quotidian life, but an experiential journey that demonstrates, as the poem's subtitle notes, the 'Growth of a Poet's Mind.' Wordsworth describes this journey as a prophetic quest that, with each new experience, sets the poet further apart from the rest of humanity. In one of the poem's most famous scenes – I refer here to the 1805 edition – the poet goes 'alone into a Shepherd's Boat', travels out onto a lake at night, stares at the moon and the natural world around him, and upon returning the boat to its original place is overcome by 'a dim and undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being' that transform him into a poet.[26] While mythologizing the romantic poet as prophet, Wordsworth simultaneously mythologizes his own self, a task that, in the lengthy and complicated history of *The Prelude*, would stretch from the beginning of his career until his death.

Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* also tells a story of becoming that is framed in mythological terms. Coleridge's magical tale of a sailor whose wretched run of luck begins with the shooting of an albatross and ends with him condemned to a living death in which he must endlessly repeat his tale provides *Cock* with the logic for its frame narrative. The mariner's compulsion to retell the story of how he became what he is expresses a discursive will to power that is echoed in the Oxford don's creeping appropriation of the narrative of *Cock*. This power is gradually revealed through Self's manipulations of his narrative, misleading the reader at a number of points by concealing important details. Self's novella, for instance, begins with an omniscient, third-person perspective, but in the middle of Chapter 2, Self

[25] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 202.

[26] William Wordsworth, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 384–85.

abruptly reveals that the main story is actually contained within a frame. This frame narrative is related by a first-person narrator who, while riding on an increasingly surreal, metaphorical train, is listening to the story of Carol as told to him by an Oxford don, an 'ersatz ancient mariner' (p. 14). The reliability of this third-person narration is abruptly transformed for the reader by the revelation of its first-person source, and Self provides a further twist when he discloses, near the novella's end, that the don is in fact a perverse, twisted incarnation of Carol. The entire narrative, therefore, has been a concealed process of self-mythologization by Carol, inherently suspect in its description of events because it is coloured both by the narrator's will to power and Carol's extreme transformation.

The mythologizing process demonstrated in Wordsworth and Coleridge is further extended in *Cock* by its references to Byron's *Don Juan*. Byron's selection of Don Juan as his protagonist has a complicated history. Don Juan is not a real historical figure but a myth, a fantasy with which Byron, who had a colourful sex life of his own, obviously identified extensively. Byron could easily, therefore, have used Don Juan's story as a vehicle for his own self-mythologization, but his version of Don Juan is instead a satire of the mythical womaniser, portrayed as a quixotic man who believes he is a great seducer when in fact it is the strong women he meets who seduce and dominate him. As such, Byron's poem must be read as tongue-in-cheek, deploying a mock-heroic style that uses the rhetoric of mythologization while simultaneously undermining it through the mechanisms of irony. Self appropriates this same tone in *Cock*, shown by his choice of the following quotation from Canto X of *Don Juan* as the epigraph for his novella:

> I won't describe,—that is, if I can help
> Description; and I won't reflect,—that is,
> If I can stave off thought, which—as a whelp
> Clings to its teat—sticks to me through the abyss
> Of this odd labyrinth; or as the kelp
> Holds by the rock; or as a lover's kiss
> Drains its first draught of lips:—but, as I said,
> I won't philosophise, and will be read.[27]

In this passage, Byron's narrator promises (rather dubiously, given his florid language) to tell his tale plainly and honestly, without philosophising or decoration. Self is implicitly making his readers the same promise – only to break his word a few pages into the narrative by revealing the textual manipulations

[27] Lord Byron, *Don Juan* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 382.

of the don. Thus, we see again the contradictory logic at work that drives both Byron's and Self's satire: a stated adherence to sincerity that is ironically and self-consciously undermined shortly after it has been issued.

Don Juan is important to an interpretation of *Cock* for more than just these shared satirical elements, for Byron's text, like Self's, places gender and power firmly at the centre of its concerns. Susan J. Wolfson, for example, examines the unstable, ambiguous sexual politics of Byron's poem. While noting the importance of Byron's homoeroticism to this discourse, Wolfson focuses on how Byron portrays heterosexuality and the fluidity of gender roles through the act of cross-dressing:

> Even granting the notoriously adept ironies of *Don Juan*, its politics of sexual difference prove remarkably complex and unstable. At times they are governed by the general satirical perspective of the poem; at other times they clash with Byron's pronounced liberal politics; and at still others they appear scarcely fixed – even within their own frame of reference. Signs that seem clear markers of difference can become agents of sexual disorientation that break down, invert, and radically call into question the categories designed to discriminate 'masculine' from 'feminine'.[28]

Wolfson also notes the way class interrupts what seems, at first glance, to be a simple, conservative opposition between masculine and feminine. Wolfson thus identifies a 'notable contradiction' at work in *Don Juan*, one that, 'despite an aristocratic allegiance' tends to 'satirize prevailing ideologies', just as Byron borrows from 'conventional masculinism' while simultaneously questioning and undermining it.[29] In choosing *Don Juan* as the epigraph for *Cock*, Will Self makes this discursive instability the guiding principle of his own work which, while exploring issues of gender and sexuality, repeatedly advances ideas and propositions to the reader, only to withdraw or qualify them in a satirical way.

In the opening paragraphs of *Cock*, for instance, Self provides a scathing caricature of the feminist thought to which Carol is introduced during her university days at Llanstephan. The supposed radicalism to which Carol is exposed is presented by Self as a shibboleth of educated privilege, 'neat tags of feminist jargon' that characterize men as 'empowered by the male phallic hegemony' and women as 'alienated' because their 'discourse was vitiated' by this 'phallocentric' oppression (p. 3). Carol nonetheless proves to be a passive subject who, like her mother, 'always . . . takes the line of least resistance, in

[28] Susan J. Wolfson, ''Their she Condition': Cross-Dressing and the Politics of Gender in *Don Juan*' *ELH*, 54.3 (1987), 585–613 (p. 585).

[29] Ibid., p. 585.

all that she ever said, or did, or even thought,' a disposition of which Beverley, 'a rotund lesbian ... from Leeds' takes cynical advantage (p. 4). 'Beverley,' Self writes, 'lectured her on the [feminist] jargon, attempting to move her from the casting couch to a speaking part in the cod philosophy,' while insinuating that Beverley's real interest lies in seducing Carol (p. 4). Indeed, Beverley shows up again two years later, after Dan and Carol have married, and 'had her way with Carol on a pile of Dan's work shirts,' an act of sexual violation that contradicts her feminist ideas about rape and violence (p. 20). In this grim scenario, with its cynical portrayal of both feminism and its unredeemed female protagonist, we can see why the story is interpreted as 'misogynist' by Kakutani, and why Sender questions whether Self's text, while containing some revolutionary elements, may ultimately be harmful to the feminist cause.

This kind of negative reaction receives its most pertinent response from Emma Parker, who points out that readings such as Sender's 'fail to recognize that Self's mode is satire, a genre that', in Self's own words, 'depends on comic exaggeration and stereotyping'.[30] Indeed, Parker shows the many ways in which Self, despite his apparently cynical critique of feminism in the novella, nonetheless 'challenges dominant modes of masculinity' in a subversive way that, Parker contends, ultimately ends up resonating with feminism's critique of sexual essentialism.[31] Matthews's position on this issue largely follows Parker's: 'Although the novellas portray problematic stereotypes and persistently link masculinity to violence and aggression, reading the text as satire establishes a clear analogy between the characters' metamorphoses and the performativity of gender.'[32] Parker and Matthews thus agree that any valid interpretation of *Cock and Bull* must take into account its satirical elements in order to understand properly its sexual politics. This is particularly true of the way that Self plays on the disjunction between biological sex and cultural gender roles in *Cock and Bull*. At first this might not seem obvious, since Carol's transformation from passivity to aggression occurs when she obtains her penis. Yet Dan also possesses a physical penis, and he is even more passive than his complacent wife, not to mention his domineering mother who, while lacking a penis, wields absolute power over him. The phallus, as a signifier of power, may be *represented* by the penis, but it is a mistake to reverse this process, to believe that a signifier is responsible for the power it symbolizes. Indeed, Self later satirizes exactly this error when he inverts the ubiquitous phallocentrism that Carol is taught by the feminists at her

[30] Parker, p. 237.
[31] Ibid., p. 230.
[32] Matthews, p. 94.

university by giving John Bull visions of London as a city replete with figurative vaginas:

> It's all cunts! Bull exclaimed to himself. . . . It's all openings, entrances and doorways. . . . London itself, Bull now realised, was essentially a network of tunnels. It was patently absurd to describe the city's architecture, as Bull had heard the art critic . . . do, as 'phallic.'. . . The real lifeblood of the city, Bull now saw, was transported in and out of quintillions of vaginas. The city was a giant Emmenthal cheese, and the experience of entering it was both greedy and erotic. (p. 250)

Bull's 'new awareness of vagocentricity' shows that simply reversing the usual symbol of sexual power from a masculine to a feminine one, while valuable in disrupting cultural assumptions about gender, does not change the issue of power itself – the signifier, even one so culturally embedded in a network of gendered power relations as the phallus, is always ultimately arbitrary, (p. 250). A reversal that involves *only* the symbolic level, that operates on the surface of things, cannot be a truly revolutionary force therefore, and it is for this reason that Self, despite his political sympathies with the critical aspects of feminism, also finds the need to set feminist ideology, when it takes on a hypocritically dogmatic form, in his satirical sights.

At the heart of *Cock*, then, is a poignant warning about the corrupting influence that power can exercise on even the most revolutionary counter-discourse. The novel's critique of feminism makes a lot more sense when read in this light: Self is not rejecting the revolutionary potential of feminist criticism, rather he is warning that it, like any other critical discourse, must find a way to check its will to power, otherwise it risks corrupting its own ethical authority. Self's novella is replete with similar examples of those ruined by being too enamoured of power. The most radical transformation, of course, is Carol, whose newly-acquired penis gives her a fresh perspective in a way that university lectures could not. The reversal of her previous passivity unleashes a grotesque series of events that culminates in the rape and murder of both Dan and his Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, Dave 2. The frame narrative, moreover, shows that Carol's lust for power has transformed her, beyond all expectations, from a lower middle-class woman into an upper middle-class man (the Oxford don). The choice of the title 'don' is a play on words, a nod to the male aristocratic title from Spanish that echoes the novella's opening reference to Byron's *Don Juan*, as well as to the Oxford University use of the term, which derives from the Latin word 'dominus' ('master'), irrefutably masculine and hierarchical in its connotation. Carol's newly fluid gender identity temporarily empowers her, but because there is

no check on her ambitions she is quickly corrupted by her newfound power, to the point where she appropriates the masculine authority she had been taught to resist. Rather than gaining autonomy by opposing the system, Carol's love of power has led her instead, quite literally, to become a perverse incarnation of the patriarchal establishment.

Carol is not the only one to be seduced by this pattern of counter-revolutionary corruption in *Cock and Bull*. The reader witnesses it, for instance, in Dan and Carol's A.A. sponsors, Dave 2 and Geena, whose ostensible desire to help others overcome their alcohol addiction veils their own hidden emotional addictions – Dave 2 is 'a parasite of the emotions,' while Geena is 'addicted to the delights of what we may call . . . psycho-empathetic voyeurism' (pp. 66-67) Carol's college friend Beverley seeks to empower her with feminist ideas, but in reality is motivated by sexual desire. In *Bull*, the reader learns that Margoulies's wife, Naomi, 'was an enlightened woman' who had 'campaigned for homosexual rights,' a point he considers when contemplating whether to tell her about his affair with Bull (p. 292). Margoulies quickly realizes that Naomi's open-mindedness is merely a social game she is willing to play so long as it does not disempower her. The comedian, Razza Rob, whose act involves telling horrible jokes about women and their genitalia, is able to get away with this misogyny by being received as an '*ironist*' who is simply mirroring the sexist prejudices of the world around him (p. 212, original italics). Bull's co-worker, Juniper, interprets Razza Rob in this light, drawing from 'her protracted sojourn on the wilder shores of psychotherapy' to gain a putative insight into the hidden meanings of other people's words – 'All except her own that was' (p. 214). Juniper's attitude represents a familiar pattern of failure by the would-be revolutionary to include themselves in their critique of power. It is precisely such critical failures that motivate Foucault, in the Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, to ask: "How does one keep from being a fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant?"[33] Foucault is all too aware that even the most progressive discourses can be corrupted by becoming enamoured with power, a warning he places at the thematic heart of the Preface.

For Self, the task of the satirist is to bring these contradictory motives to light, and in *Cock* he again models his strategy on a literary precedent: Nietzsche's final book, *Ecce Homo*, an intellectual autobiography that retraces the development of his philosophical ideas. Self connects his book to Nietzsche's by borrowing the subtitle of *Ecce Homo* – 'How One Becomes What One Is' – for the title of Chapter 6 of *Cock*. *Ecce Homo* is not a straightforward survey of Nietzsche's ideas, but an exercise in self-mythologizing that uses satire to subvert the temptations of narcissism. Nietzsche deflates the

[33] Foucault, 'Preface," p.xii.

ego of the typical autobiographer by making fun of the genre, not least in the ironic titles of his early chapters: 'Why I am So Wise', 'Why I am So Clever', and 'Why I Write Such Good Books'. In the foreword to *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche lays out his motivations for undertaking such a task – a revolutionary desire to reveal truths that he claims humanity has hitherto been too cowardly to confront, and in the process to clarify who he is and what he wants. Nietzsche reiterates, in particular, the difference between himself and other self-styled prophets, 'those gruesome hybrids of sickness and will to power.'[34] The 'prophet' represents the compromised revolutionary who has, in Foucault's terms, become enamoured of power – Beverley the predatory 'feminist', Dave 2 the vampiric 'liberator', Razza Rob the misogynistic 'satirist' – to whom Nietzsche opposes his mouthpiece, Zarathustra. 'He does not only speak differently,' reiterates Nietzsche, 'he *is* different'.[35] It is a mistake, then, to see Self's target as feminism or Alcoholics Anonymous or bad stand-up comedy – as for any good satirist, the true object of his attack is the concealed hypocrisy of his subjects, whoever they may be.

The unveiling of such hypocrisy is a revolutionary action, and as such it places the satirist under a similar obligation to examine the underlying ethical health of their own will to power to avoid participating in the same hypocrisy they oppose. For both Nietzsche and Self, this self-scrutiny is primarily a matter of effectiveness. Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*:

> The *lie* of the ideal has hitherto been the curse on reality, through it mankind itself has become mendacious and false down to its deepest instincts – to the point of worshipping the *inverse* values to those which alone could guarantee it prosperity, future, the exalted *right* to a future.[36]

The problem with hypocrisy lies not in its logical contradictions, but rather that, by concealing the truth about reality, hypocrisy makes human beings ineffective in achieving their true desires. Even if they gain a modicum of power, their slavishness, their sickliness, turns that power against them in a way that, while giving them the illusion of fulfilment, in reality disempowers them. The monstrosity that Carol eventually becomes epitomizes this ironic reversal: the power she gains has corrupted her to the point where she can no longer distinguish between imagination and reality. Far from freeing her, her sickly, hypocritical will to power ultimately guarantees her own loss of

[34] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 5.
[35] Ibid., original italics.
[36] Ibid., p. 4, original italics.

mastery. Carol's story may thus be read as a warning about the dangers of unchecked power.

Self shows that the dangers of being corrupted by power are inherent in the production of any discourse, including that of the satirist (indeed, he often hints playfully that his own position may have been compromised in this way). Self thus presents the genuinely effective satirist's task as a strategy of power, a power that is expressed, in *Cock and Bull*, through the discursive framework of gender and sexuality. The particularly revolutionary impulse of Self's satirical vision is located in the fact that, on the whole, it does not seek merely to tear down and destroy, because the targets of his satire (as we saw in Self's relationship to feminism) may also be his own allies. As Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*: 'The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also to hate his friends.'[37] As such, we might see Self's satire as an attempt to show that hypocrisy is not a moral shortcoming but rather a failure of strategy, in which empowerment, placed in the hands of a sickly, slavish will to power, tends toward corruption due to the ethical lack of self-control that comes, as Foucault warns in his Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, from being enamoured by power. The principle that Self reiterates throughout *Cock and Bull*, a lesson he draws from a host of earlier satirical examples, is that with true empowerment comes the responsibility of keeping ourselves in check, not because we should be ashamed of our will to power, but because such self-awareness protects us from the danger of power turning against us, consuming us, and so transforming us into hypocrites who are driven by a rage that, in reality, makes us its puppets.

[37] Ibid., p. 6.